

Plagiarism

Kidney International (2007) 71, 91–92. doi:10.1038/sj.ki.5002083

There are many types of scientific misconduct, but it seems that plagiarism is on everybody's mind. Hardly a day goes by without some news article about the latest in plagiarism by the most improbable perpetrator. High school students apparently sit at their computers and download term papers in lieu of doing their homework. Even more bizarrely, their teachers have a Web-based program that can find out whether these term papers are actually downloaded from the Web or composed *de novo*. All you have to do is log on to <http://www.plagiarism.org>, which will then invite you to paste the paper into sites called "turnitin" or "iThenticate," cute names for powerful search engines that identify where these texts came from. Should we conclude from this that we are at heart cheaters — or, rather, that those who plagiarize are newsworthy, while the majority silently plod on in honest ways? For us in scientific publishing the situation is more complex, because there is more at issue than simply doing homework. The integrity of the scientific enterprise rests on a simple foundation, that of trust between authors, editors, and publishers. That is why it is so disappointing, even shocking, when this covenant is broken.

Over the past year we have found a few instances of plagiarism; some may have been naive mistakes resulting from a lack of knowledge of the rules of the game, so to speak, whereas others seem to have been more premeditated. All are worth discussing. Let us start by stating the obvious: we publish only original research conducted in the most rigorous manner, with real, rather than invented, data. This self-evident premise serves to acquaint readers with our responsibility to them in publishing only the best research and will be worth remembering when I present some examples that we have seen. We have to remember that *Kidney International*, like most other journals, asks authors to state, when they submit a paper, that all the material is original, has not been published elsewhere, and is not being reviewed by another journal.

Is plagiarism a crime punishable by the courts? Violation of copyright can be construed as a crime. But the most critical issue, in my view, is not whether plagiarism is a formally defined crime in one law system or another; rather, it is first and foremost a breach of faith in the social

contract between reader and writer. The term 'plagiarism,' apparently invented by Ben Jonson to refer to kidnapping, has been claimed to be a 'new' crime that began when writing became a profession. The ancients all borrowed from each other, it is said, without appropriate reference. However, I submit that the best writers always knowingly referred to their predecessors. This is the origin of "if we have seen far it is because we have stood on the shoulders of Giants."¹ There are enough entries in medieval literature where exact references are made to previous texts to make one feel that plagiarism was always to be avoided. But what is one to make of self-plagiarism? Here an author simply republishes what he or she has published previously but asserts that it is new and original. But as far as we are concerned, the breach of faith has occurred even when authors plagiarize their own work. The fundamental problem is that of originality.

Let me describe a few examples from the past year and review with you what we have done. In one instance, a paper was submitted to us and I assigned it to one of our associate editors to manage. He told me that within a day he was asked to review the same paper by another journal. In other words, the author had submitted the same paper simultaneously to two journals. We, and the other journal, forbid such actions, since, aside from the wasted time of our reviewers, all journals expect authors to obey the rule that a paper must be submitted to a single journal, rather than to send it to a variety of journals and then choose the 'best' one that accepts it for publication. This is not plagiarism; it is simply a matter of etiquette and good manners. How often this happens we could never find out, as this particular case was a remarkable coincidence. The editor of the other journal and I wrote a strongly worded letter to these authors, and we put their names in a special list of authors whose future submissions will be examined very closely.

We also received a paper whose authors had studied the effect of some hormone on a cellular process. Again by coincidence, the reviewer noticed that a previous paper by a different group had remarkably similar wording. When he alerted us to the issue, we compared the two papers, and the results were astounding. Essentially the two texts were identical except for the choice of factor

Qais Al-Awqati¹
Editor

¹Correspondence: Qais Al-Awqati, Departments of Medicine and Physiology & Cellular Biophysics, Columbia University, 630 W. 168th Street, New York, New York 10032, USA. E-mail: qa1@columbia.edu

and some of the results; the expressions, even the abstract were pretty close to identical. You did not need to go the iThenticate site to see the plagiarism. Given that the primary language of the authors of the submitted paper was not English and the letter to the editor revealed severe difficulties with syntax, some members of the editorial board suggested that perhaps this was an innocent attempt at simply trying to formulate the problem properly using a successful (that is, published) example. However, as someone whose primary language is not English, I find this excuse somewhat condescending and insulting. Plagiarism is more often than not a moral issue, and each of us regardless of background has the same sense of right and wrong. Is, then, the concept of originality culturally determined? The celebration of originality, at least in art, is probably a modern view and is certainly not present in all cultures. Some of the greatest Chinese paintings are copies of earlier masterpieces. But I am sure that this is restricted to some kinds of art and is not a general cultural principle. It is hard to think of a Chinese or Japanese poet who produces an exact copy of an ancient masterpiece and is considered anything other than a scribe. So despite everything, originality (and not only in science) must be viewed as important by all cultures, certainly by those ancient and sophisticated non-Western cultures that are the ones under discussion here. This, of course, raises the issue of whether the intent to deceive changes anything. My feeling is that plagiarism is plagiarism regardless of intent, a view shared by Mallon, who wrote the best book on the subject.² Mallon chastises the academic enterprise by showing that the response to exposed plagiarists has been mild enough to be non-deterrent.

We received a very nice paper and published it after careful review. Within a few days of its appearance online, we received a letter saying that the figures from the paper were previously published, some by the same author but others by former associates! We are not professional criminal investigators. But a quick look at the complaints showed that the letter writer was correct. Figures have such a large amount of information that it is generally easy to tell whether a picture is identical to another. I asked each of our associate editors to independently verify whether the pictures were plagiarized, and they all confirmed

the problem. So now what do we do? The paper did not originate in the United States, where we are expected to refer such cases to the Office of Research Integrity at the Department of Health and Human Services (<http://ori.dhhs.gov>), which either takes over the issue or advises us on what procedures to take. We certainly do not have the resources to perform a formal investigation. We decided to send a formal letter to the dean of the corresponding author's medical school telling him of our concern. We also sent a formal letter to the director of the government agency that was listed as having funded the work. We have not heard from them after several months. We will send another letter now. If we do not hear from them, we will then alert the author that we have a problem with this matter and ask him to explain it. If the explanation is not satisfactory, we will start procedures to retract the paper. The most important procedures are to ensure the confidentiality of the information given by the complainant and to maintain fair treatment of the accused author. We will allow appeal of our threat of retraction of the paper. However, we have to be firm in our response. We certainly would be grateful to hear your thoughts on the subject in order to modify our position, but the procedure that I have outlined seems fair to the accuser and the accused party while maintaining the integrity of the scientific effort.

It probably has not escaped the reader that all the cases we have seen were brought to our attention in a highly random manner. There is no systematic way in which we can identify plagiarism. Unlike our academic colleagues who grade term papers, we cannot simply use a search engine; all plagiarized work poses as original research with new results. The nature of scientific results is not conducive to the cut-and-paste type of text plagiarism and hence to its detection by a standard search engine. It is not likely that the capacity of computers can be increased to the level where all published data are encrypted in a searchable manner to identify copied material. This seems an insurmountable problem that leaves us in the position of being at the mercy of the honesty of our authors, which is after all the best place to be.

1. Merton RK. *On the Shoulders of Giants: a Shandean Postscript*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1965, pp 348.
2. Mallon T. *Stolen Words*. Harvest Books: New York, 2001, pp 356.